

**EXPLORING AND ESTABLISHING POTENTIAL MARKETS FOR
THE ALASKA PEONY AND OTHER CUT FLOWERS
FY 2007**

Peonies are commercially grown and marketed as a cut flower worldwide. Demand for use in weddings and bouquets is growing because of their large size, unique fragrance, and hardiness during transportation and storage. July and August comprise the off-season for world peony production, except in Alaska when the peony crop blooms. Although production research has been ongoing at the University of Alaska, before the peony could become commercially viable and competitive, a number of marketing issues had to be addressed. FSMIP awarded the Alaska Division of Agriculture, in partnership with the University of Alaska and the state's peony growers, a \$59,845 grant to explore and evaluate potential overseas markets for Alaska peonies; identify handling and sanitary/phytosanitary issues and constraints; explore options for Alaska growers to market collaboratively; research and develop packaging and shipping protocols for exporting peonies; and conduct educational and networking conferences to disseminate findings. As a result of this grant, the Alaska Peony Growers Association (APGA) was formed, a website was created, and test shipments were evaluated as to quality, stem length, harvest timing, and shipping and tracking methods. In 2009, thousands of peonies were exported from Alaska, and the outlook for new markets is promising as interested buyers contact producers through the APGA website.

Final Report

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Exploring and Establishing Potential Markets for the Alaska Peony and other cut flowers

2007 Federal- State Marketing Improvement Program

Final Project Report

Submitted by:

State of Alaska

Department of Natural Resources

Division of Agriculture

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Background:

The Association of Specialty Cut Flower Growers (ASCFG) named the peony 2004's cut flower of the year. Traditionally a grave site decorator, today the peony is used for weddings and cut flower bouquets and is sought out for its large size, fragrance and tolerance for abuse during transportation and storage.

Peonies grow in temperate climates and bloom at various times depending on climactic conditions. In New Zealand and Australia the bloom period occurs from October through December. In Chile blooms are arriving from January to February, and then March through June in the United States. Throughout July and August there have been very limited commercially grown peonies available for sale; until now. Peonies bloom in Alaska in July and August. Alaska peonies have the potential to supply markets when alternative supply sources are unavailable.

Alaska peony producers have established a productive and quality product, but were seeking additional market outlets. This project explored opportunities for successful and profitable marketing and exporting of Alaska grown peonies. This project capitalized on the growing popularity of peony production in Alaska and explored potential markets for the already established crops.

The project had four goals:

1. Explore potential markets for Alaska's peony and determine which markets will provide the most profitable return on investments.
2. Determine the necessity of and the best organization structure for Alaska's peony growers.

3. Research and develop packaging materials and shipping methods for export of peonies.
4. Educate producers through dissemination of both our marketing research and the cultural practices research completed at UAF.

Cooperators & Beneficiaries:

The University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) Agriculture and Forestry Experiment Station has made significant contributions to the success of this project. Dr. Patricia Holloway, associate professor and director of the Georgeson Botanical Garden at UAF began her study on peonies for cut flower production in 2001 which spurred the interest of individual growers and the marketing staff at the Division of Agriculture.

Dr. Holloway, her staff and students have published four different documents regarding peony:

1. *Production and Transportation Considerations in the Export of Peonies from Fairbanks, Alaska* by Marie A Klingman, 2002
2. *Peony – a future crop for Alaska?* by Doreen Fitzgerald, 2003
3. *An Introduction to Harvesting and Selling Alaska Cut Flower Peonies* by James D Auer & Patricia S. Holloway, 2008
4. *Peonies: An Economic Background for Alaska Flower Growers* by James D Auer & Joshua Greenberg, 2009

The direct beneficiaries of this project include the 53 individuals throughout the State of Alaska who have joined the Alaska Peony Growers Association (APGA) as well as the many other individuals who have expressed interest in the program and attended a conference or field trip as part of the program. The grower members of APGA have planted over 33,000 peonies with an estimated 11,000 more to be planted in 2010. A map on page 23 shows the placement of these growers' farms' throughout the State.

Results:

The project was extremely successful. Below are the goals and objectives of the project as originally proposed along with the various accomplishments achieved under each category.

1. **Explore potential markets for Alaska's peony and determine which markets will provide the most profitable return on investments.**
 - a. Attend flower markets, grower association meetings and perform site visits to meet potential buyers.

- b. Provide an opportunity for selected producers and industry representatives with specialized talents to participate in site visits at a reduced rate so they can pass on acquired information to other growers.
- c. Identify and address any sanitary or phyto-sanitary restraints.

Goal #1 Actions & Results:

Originally a visit to Japan was scheduled for October 2007. It was discovered that the Oregon Department of Agriculture (a partner with Alaska in the Western United States Agricultural Trade Association) had extensive knowledge of the International Flower Expo in Japan and therefore our trip was cancelled. Division staff worked with Oregon Department of Agriculture staff to identify potential markets, contacts, restrictions, etc. The funds originally identified for that trip were utilized in accomplishing other goals already identified in the original proposal, including helping to address the increased travel costs for the trip to New Zealand.

A site visit to the West Coast took place May 18th – 24th, 2008. Two Division staff and one steering committee member took part in the trip. Locations visited included three wholesale buyers, the largest flower auction in the North America, four farmers markets, and six individual growers. The knowledge gained from this trip was passed to the group through a formal presentation, notes and a picture CD.

Five producers representing four farms traveled to New Zealand and Tasmania November 24th – December 12th, 2008. Unforeseen circumstances prevented the Division of Agriculture representative from making the trip. However, the Division of Agriculture outlined all of the travel arrangements, the farm visits, and coordinated with the growers.

Division staff, APGA members, and UAF personnel are all working closely with USDA Agriculture Research Service and others to identify and address any sanitary or phyto-sanitary issues that may develop. None to date have been discovered.

2. Determine the necessity of and the best organizational structure for Alaska's peony growers.

- a. Determine the needs of designated buyers and how best to meet them.
- b. Perform a cost benefit analysis on various organizational structures including a cooperative, an association, a brokerage, and an independent system.
- c. Visit a production system with similar geographical constraints to better understand handling systems, shipping methods, and organizational structure.

- d. Work with a subcontracted marketing agency to develop one or multiple logos and marketing strategies.

Goal #2 Actions & Results:

During our first producer meeting two guest speakers were invited to speak on organizational structures; Andrew Crow gave a “Comparison of Corporate Ownership Entities for Marketing” and Hans Geier spoke on the “Business Principles for a New Marketing Organization.”

Producers found the information to be quite valuable and as a result, a Steering Committee was formed. The State was broken out into three regional areas and a representative from each area actively participated on the Steering Committee. The Steering Committee developed a group e-mailing system and initiated a survey of the group to identify interests, needs and number of plants currently being cultivated. The next step for the Steering Committee was to survey the group regarding a name, organizational structure and logo design. Division staff stayed in frequent contact with the Steering Committee, participated in the surveys, and offered assistance when necessary.

The group eventually voted on a name: Alaska Peony Growers Association (APGA) and a logo (see page 10). Through many teleconferences and steering committee meetings it was determined that the group would organize as a non-profit corporation, under the name Alaska Peony Growers Association. Bylaws were drafted, membership levels decided upon, officers elected, and action committees formed.

3. Research and develop packaging materials and shipping methods for export of peonies.

- a. Work with a subcontractor to develop a unique and identifiable package.
- b. Establish buyers preferred method of delivery of peonies.
- c. Test shipments to potential buyers to identify and address any shipping issues.

Goal #3 Actions & Results:

At the first conference, guest speaker Ray Gray brought peony boxes from Oregon and New Zealand for the group of producers to see. Labeling requirements, standards and shipping methods were discussed in detail. Mr. Gray emphasized the necessity for air freight through an expedited, traceable medium.

A member of the steering committee took a lead role in identifying the best packaging type and source for peony shipments. There are no cardboard producers in Alaska, so shipping costs are a restraining factor. Because printing on the box increases box costs exponentially, we limited the amount of shipping information included on the box. We quickly realized that we could design our own shipping labels in the form of a sticker and be much more cost efficient. Printing costs also kept us from putting the Alaska Peony Growers Logo on the boxes. Sample stickers were ordered to determine the best size, type, etc. for use on the boxes.

Three test shipments were mailed during the growing season this year. Valuable information was gleaned from the recipients regarding stem length, harvest timing, as well as shipping and tracking methods. Positive feedback was received on both the quality of the boxes used and the appeal of the APGA logo stickers.

4. Educate producers through dissemination of both our marketing research and the cultural practices research completed at UAF.

- a. Host three producer conferences.
- b. Compile and disseminate publications to share the research and knowledge gained by this project.

Goal #4 Actions & Results:

The first producer meeting was hosted by the Division of Agriculture on February 1st & 2nd 2008 in Fairbanks, Alaska. It was scheduled to follow the annual Nursery & Greenhouse Growers Conference. Fifty-six people attended the meeting; including a wide variety of individuals ranging from those currently producing peonies to those interested in production. Ray Gray of Sunset Flower Shippers, a peony grower and wholesale peony broker was our guest speaker.

Next a field trip was held in conjunction with the University of Alaska Fairbanks and the Georgeson Botanical Gardens in the Fairbanks area in July of 2008. Thirty-six interested members participated. Despite inclement weather, field visits were completed in three different growers' fields' and a wide variety of cultural and biological information was shared. An evening presentation was given by Doug Warner and Richard Estelle where information regarding the West Coast site visit was disseminated.

In January 2009 we hosted the third Peony Growers meeting. Once again we recognized and acted upon the natural synergy of hosting our meeting in conjunction with the annual Nursery Greenhouse meeting. Over 60 people attended the day and a half meeting and the evaluations showed success. Our keynote speaker was Piet Wierstra from Oregon Perennial Company, a peony rootstock & cut flower producer whom we had met during the 2008

West Coast site visit. Piet was very well received and the information he provided was invaluable.

A final conference was held in August 2009. Growers gathered to hear from Jim & Carol Adelman of Adelman's Peony Gardens in Oregon. Four APGA members' farms' were visited where cultural practices were discussed, cutting and packaging was demonstrated, and again more knowledge gleaned and shared.

In an effort to disseminate information throughout the state to interested individuals, the group created three tools: an informational brochure, an informational rack card, and a website.

1. An informational brochure (see page 11-12) was developed by the Steering Committee for distribution to the general public. The brochure was handed out at multiple fairs, community meetings and other gatherings. The brochure discusses the peony cut flower market, the growing Alaska industry, and the roll of the Alaska Peony Growers Association.
2. An informational rack card was developed to explain peony "shelf life" and bloom time to potential buyers (see page 13). Although not necessary for exporting shipments to professional buyers, the rack card proved quite valuable to producers selling their flowers directly to retail flower shops and to customers at the farmers market.
3. The steering committee of APGA agreed that the most efficient way to disseminate information amongst members was through a web site. www.alaskapeonies.org was launched in November and has proven quite useful.

Project Status & Recommendations:

In 2009 thousands of peony stems were exported out of Alaska. Interested buyers continue to make contact with producers through the website. A flower broker in Anchorage is optimistic of the potential for peony sales in 2010 as he had to turn down many orders in 2009 due to lack of availability.

The APGA is currently planning for their upcoming Winter Growers Conference, February 19-20th, 2009. The APGA successfully applied to the Division of Agriculture for USDA Specialty Crop Block Grant funding for research into plant health issues and further development of their web site.

Additional Information:

A number of publications and items were produced as a result of this project including:

1. The APGA website www.alaskapeonies.org and a corresponding blog for members only.
2. A logo for use by APGA members, see page 10.
3. An informational brochure describing APGA and the potential for a peony industry in Alaska, see page 11-12.
4. An informational rack card for selling peonies within Alaska, see page 13.
5. Stickers for use on the shipping boxes, see logo file on page 10. The stickers created are identical to the logo
6. Shipping boxes for use by APGA members, see page 14 for photos of the boxes.
7. Three newspaper articles:
 - a. "Peonies a boon for Alaska gardeners" Anchorage Daily News, see page 15-18.
 - b. "Peony growers reflect on Peony Project Success" Alaska Farm & Ranch News, see page 19-21.
 - c. "Alaskans pick flower power" Taieri Herald, see page 22.

Alaska Peony Growers Association official logo:



Association Objectives

The Association's mission is to provide support and assistance to our grower/members in all aspects of production and marketing; to promote the peony cut flower industry in Alaska; and to advocate for peony research within the state.

Members of the Association have joined together for mutual benefits of sharing information, purchasing rootstock and supplies at larger quantity discount prices, and gaining advantages in marketing. Members have committed to establishing and maintaining a reputation for the Alaska peony industry of producing the highest **quality** product, meeting commitments with **reliability**, and conducting transactions with **integrity**.

Our aim is to make the Alaska peony cut flower industry a significant part of Alaska agriculture.



Join The Alaska Peony Growers Association

While so much of Alaska agricultural production is restricted to supplying only limited local markets, in direct competition with imports from elsewhere, peony cut flowers may offer Alaskan farmers an important export product with significant potential sales to international markets.

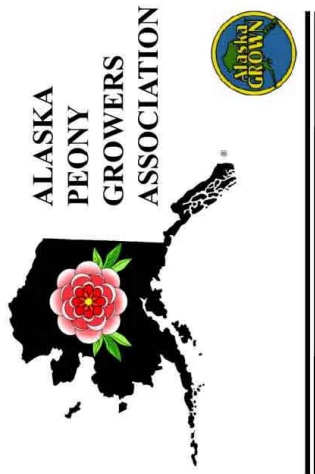


You are invited to join our Association and support or participate in the new peony cut flower industry in Alaska. Until we're able to establish a permanent address you may contact us by e-mail through amy.pettit@alaska.gov.

State funds for this brochure were matched with Federal funds under the Federal-State Marketing Improvement Program of the Agricultural Marketing Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture.



ARJA-PG-01 2008



The **Alaska Peony Growers Association** was organized to support and promote all aspects of the commercial peony industry in Alaska. This industry is primarily centered on the export of cut peony flowers to wholesale markets, but also emphasizes supplying fresh cut flowers to local Alaska markets as well.

Association members include peony growers and processors, as well as others interested in the growth and development of this unique and promising agricultural industry in Alaska.

The worldwide peony cut flower market is enormous. Peony's large, colorful and fragrant blooms are in demand for weddings, funerals, trade shows, conventions and many other special events. Alaska peonies are especially favored because of their large size, bright colors and high quality.

Commercial Alaska peony farms are located across the state, from Fairbanks and North Pole in the interior, throughout the Matanuska and Susitna valleys, and around the Kenai Peninsula.

The Alaska Peony Industry

The peony cut flower industry in Alaska is in its infancy. While peonies have been grown in Alaska gardens for many years, and several growers have produced peonies for sale in local markets, it has been only recently that research conducted by the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, has identified the potential for large scale commercial production for export.

The Potential

Peonies bloom in most of the lower 48 states in May and June. By early July there are few to be found in the markets there. Peonies produced in New Zealand and elsewhere in the southern hemisphere come to market around December. Alaska peonies generally bloom in late June, through July, and even into August. This means that Alaska-grown peonies can be shipped to established flower markets when no others are available, providing opportunities for profitable sales.



Research Needs

Given the short history of commercial peony production in Alaska, there are many associated questions yet to be answered, such as which peony varieties might be best grown here to meet both market preferences and the late season blooming niche. Prospective growers need to know what Alaska locations and environmental conditions would provide ideal growing sites. Established farmers wanting to diversify their crops by cultivating peonies need to learn the specific requirements of the cut flower industry. Continuing market research is also needed to identify the best markets for Alaska peonies to gain the greatest economic returns for our growers.



Growing Peonies in Alaska

Peony roots are normally planted after the first of September and before the first winter freeze. Flowers are not usually produced in harvestable quantities until the plants are three or four years old, at which time they may produce about ten commercial blooms per plant per year. Depending upon the plant spacing chosen by the grower, as many as 8,000 to 10,000 plants may be grown per acre.

Harvest

Peony flowers harvested for export are cut while still in their bud form so they will open to full bloom at their final destination. Stems are cut by hand at just the right stage of development and then quickly placed in refrigeration to retard blooming. After the buds are chilled they're graded, bunched, packed tightly in boxes and delivered to the shipper. Harvesting and processing require a great deal of careful hand work to ensure delivery of high quality flowers.





ALASKA PEONY GROWERS ASSOCIATION
<http://alaskapeonies.org>

Styles of Flowers:

- Double and Bombs – very full with many eye catching petals
- Semi Doubles– full large flowers
- Singles and Japanese – two or three layers of petals with outstanding yellow stamens

Colors:

- White
- Light Pink
- Bright Pink
- Red
- Coral

To get the longest life from your peony flowers:

- Maintain vase water level – they are thirsty flowers
- Keep away from strong sunlight
- Keep cool

To encourage buds to open faster:

- Recut stems
- Place in warm water in a warm place

<http://alaskapeonies.org>
Contact this local grower for more information.

Stages of Maturity

Tight Bud

- True color is just showing
- Opens in 2-3 days
- Lasts 7-10 days with care



Starting to Open

- Opens in 1-2 days
- Lasts 5-7 days with care



Just Opening

- Will continue to open for 2-3 days
- Lasts another 4-5 days with care



Photos by
Georgeson Botanical
Garden staff

State funds for this brochure were matched with federal funds under the Federal-State Marketing Improvement Program of the Agricultural Marketing Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Peony Shipment Test Boxes



Peony paradise

By ELIZABETH BLUEMINK
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(02/02/09 21:19:16)

Once upon a time a scientist in Fairbanks wondered out loud about an idea that seemed fantastical at the time.

Why not grow flowers in Alaska, put them on jet planes -- we're one of the world's biggest air cargo hubs, after all -- and sell them around the world?

Alaska plus flowers equals lucrative business opportunity?

Not a natural association, perhaps. But as the result of her random query at a gardening conference, scientist Pat Holloway discovered a hot lead about Alaska's untapped, economic advantage in the global flower trade.

The advantage, in a word: peonies.

Chances are you've seen peonies in a bridal bouquet, hotel floral arrangement or neighborhood garden. With huge, fluffy, fragrant blossoms in shades of pink, red and white, they look like roses on steroids. Florists commonly sell them for \$5 per stem.

A Lower 48 garden expert told Holloway, a University of Alaska Fairbanks horticulturist, that Alaska had a potential mother lode with its late-blooming peonies. His tip unleashed a wild chain of events that so far has involved:

- Trips by Alaskans to learn the peony trade at farms in exotic locales, including Tasmania and New Zealand. Some of those growers plan to visit Alaska this summer to assist Railbelt peony growers with their harvests.
- Pulse-racing conversations between Alaskans and anxious European flower brokers demanding thousands of peonies -- Right Now!
- The creation of a loose-knit organization of pioneering Alaska peony farmers ranging from Fairbanks to Homer.

Why all the fuss over peonies?

Here's the deal.

Apparently nowhere else but Alaska are farmers growing vibrant crops of peonies that bloom at the end of the summer. That's "late" compared to the rest of the world, where peonies -- a cool-season crop -- typically flower in the spring and early summer.

Despite the flower industry's concerted effort to cultivate peonies -- from Chile to Holland -- to ensure a year-round supply, trade screeches to a halt between July and September.

Think summer weddings.

"People are just itching to have peonies for weddings in July and August," said Cory Correll, owner of Works of Art Flowers, a high-end Anchorage florist.

Shipping peonies out of Anchorage would be a cinch because of its air cargo industry, said Correll, who specializes in the reverse: importing flowers to Alaska.

'LAUGHING ON THE FLOOR'

Holloway learned about Alaska's peony advantage in 1998.

In 2000, she received \$10,000 -- a portion of a Sen. Ted Stevens earmark for crop research -- and used the money to pay for a few each of 30 peony varieties and student research. She watched the flowers grow -- it takes three to four years to produce a commercial crop -- and started writing scientific reports.

Before long, she began receiving out-of-the-blue phone calls from European flower brokers who read her reports on the Internet.

"A buyer called from London, saying he wanted 100,000 peony stems per week, minimum," Holloway said.

During the phone call, "I was laughing on the floor. I thought, 'Wow, there must be something to this,' " she said.

It got weirder. Peony growers from around the world started offering advice. Two of them even showed up in Fairbanks and visited Holloway's peony test plot after their Alaska cruise tours. One of them, from Tasmania, gave an impromptu lecture to local growers. Why so kind? These farmers sell their peonies at a different time of year. They aren't threatened if Alaskans join the trade, Holloway said.

Even Red Kennicott, the great-great grand-nephew of Alaska explorer and naturalist Robert Kennicott -- the namesake of the historic Alaska mega-copper mine near McCarthy -- called her to find out about the peonies.

Though the Kennicott name is now synonymous with copper mining, the family has been cultivating flowers since the 1800s, not digging for metal. Kennicott Brothers Floral, a family company, owns peony farms in Michigan and Arkansas. It has ties to a farm in Chile, as well.

Reached last week, Red Kennicott, the company president, said he heard about Alaska peonies in trade publications.

"I've always thought they probably should grow up there," he said. The demand for Alaska peonies, especially in late summer, should be quite good.

PEONY PIONEERS

That was a couple years ago. Flash forward to the present.

Ten to 15 Alaska peony growers have sprouted in the Railbelt. They've formed an Alaska Peony Growers Association and are considering a co-op business model for selling their cut peonies.

Two years ago, a pair of married Soldotna geologists bought a farm in Sterling solely to enter the peony-growing business. They have about 7,000 plants in the ground and will hit commercial production next year.

They didn't even know how to drive a tractor when they bought the farm, said co-owner Sue Kent. Running the 40-acre property, which also produces hay, has created a second full-time job in the summer, she said.

"It's just a whole new research project," she said.

Homer nursery owner Rita Jo Shoultz planted about 3,000 peonies and began shipping stems last summer. This summer, she's sending peonies to a wedding in Italy and a fancy do in Singapore.

She likes the fact that she can grow the flowers -- for now, anyway -- as a side business. Several of her friends also plan to plant hundreds of peonies for supplemental income.

Is she worried about big peony growers discovering this new local industry and shouldering in to seize the market?

"I think it's going to be quite a few years before the little niche (farmer) has anything to worry about," she said.

PROFITS OR BLUNDERS?

This isn't the first time Alaskans have jumped on grandiose plans to export something other than crude oil, minerals, timber or wild salmon.

So far, most ideas to export agricultural products have failed, even when millions of state dollars were pumped into them.

In the 1980s, state leaders thought they had a brilliant idea for a major Alaska crop. They'd grow barley for Alaska dairy farmers and for export.

But the Delta barley project was a disaster. The state-funded venture sucked up millions of dollars, pitted coastal communities against each other and left a bunch of farmers bankrupt.

So far, the commercial peony concept has stayed low-key, with most Alaska gardeners hearing about it at meetings or reading about it in newsletters. Yes, there have been several grants -- including the Stevens earmark -- but most of the work has been done by Alaskans quietly investing their own money to buy land, equipment and peony roots.

The state Division of Agriculture ginned up some money last year to help Alaska growers travel to remote peony farms in New Zealand and Tasmania. But the growers -- including Kent and Shoultz -- footed most of their own expenses and worked at the farms, learning how to harvest large quantities of peonies and prepare them for shipping.

The main problem with exporting Alaska crops is costly infrastructure and shipping. Alaska has plenty of thriving farms, but their business models don't support exports, Holloway said.

With a single peony stem's wholesale price at roughly \$1.25 or more, even small farms have the potential to be moneymakers Outside. A single plant can produce 10 stems. And Alaskans may be able to charge a premium, off-season price, she said.

"I think within three years, I'll have paid all my expenses and be in profit mode," said Shoultz, the Homer grower.

The peony growers might be onto something good, resource economist Steve Colt said.

"This is a very different situation than exporting a bulk commodity that has a low-dollar value per ton. When you can measure the value in dollars per ounces, it's more likely that a product can be exported (profitably) from Alaska," said Colt, of the University of Alaska Anchorage's Institute for Social and Economic Research.

Find Elizabeth Bluemink online at adn.com/contact/ebluemink or call 257-4317.

Peony growers reflect on Peony Project success

10/19/09

By AMY PETTIT, Alaska Division of Agriculture

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Jim Adelman of Adelman's Peony Gardens, answers questions during a tour of his fields. *Photo courtesy Division of Agriculture*

Forty Alaska Peony Growers Association (APGA) members met at the Soldotna Sports Center in early August for the kick-off of the 2009 APGA Summer Meeting & Workshop. The workshop began with an overview of the two-year long "Peony Project" as led by the State Division of Agriculture and launched with funding from the USDA Federal State Marketing Improvement Program.

Jim Adelman of Adelman's Peony Gardens gave a two-hour presentation entitled "Marketing and Shipping Cut Flowers." If you haven't heard of Adelman's Peony Gardens, you've probably not done much research into peonies. They are at the top of the list of renowned and respected producers of peony root stock and cut flowers. You can get a glimpse of their gorgeous operation at . <http://peonyparadise.com> And if you're traveling through the northern Willamette Valley (Oregon) between May 1 and June 15, be sure to stop in and visit their beautiful show gardens! What a treat!

The second day of the conference began with another extensive and very informative presentation from Adelman – this one entitled "Peony Field Management." As peony production on a commercial scale is a fairly new endeavor in Alaska, this was another extremely popular presentation. APGA members have planted 33,000 peonies thus far, with an estimated 11,000 more to be planted in 2010. Row spacing, fertilizer, herbicide and

pesticide applications, irrigation – all topics were thoroughly discussed and shown in pictures. Some growers will be digging up root stock and making changes to their fields based on information gleaned from Adelman.

The group then heard from Dr. Alberto Pantoja, research leader and research entomologist for the USDA Agriculture Research Service in Fairbanks. Dr. Pantoja and staff have been performing a variety of research on peonies including: bud blast, insects that may affect peony bud production, and tobacco rattle virus. APGA members are happy to have the support and knowledge of Dr. Pantoja and hope that his efforts will continue.

Corey Carrol of Works of Art Flowers in Anchorage then gave the group a florists' perspective by detailing packaging, ordering, and receiving information. Corey has acted as a broker for hundreds of Alaska peony stems this summer and is very optimistic about the potential market. He was receiving phone calls and requests for more Alaska peonies throughout the meeting – especially for white peonies.

Dr. Pat Holloway wrapped up the morning presentations with an update on peony research being conducted at the UAF Georgeson Botanical Garden in Fairbanks. A very interesting study resulted in an unexpected outcome. Dr. Holloway and staff compared the vase life of cut peonies after a variety of post-harvest handling techniques were implemented. Some peonies were taken directly to the cooler, some were left in the field for three hours in full sunshine after being cut, and others were placed directly into a vase. One would expect that the flowers left in the field would have much shorter vase life than those treated in the recommended fashion – being placed in the cooler immediately. Surprisingly, the results were not significantly different! Dr. Holloway is sure to repeat this study again, as the results were not expected.

The afternoon entailed two outstanding farm visits, the first at Echo Lake Farm, home to Richard and Irene Reppers' peony fields. The Reppers have been growing peonies for a few years; they currently have 5,000 plants in the ground with plans to expand their production to 20,000 plants in the future. We then traveled to Clay Sullivan and Sue Kent's farm, Midnight Sun Peonies.

Sullivan and Kent have been in operation for three years and have planted over 7,000 root stock. Today they have 5,600 surviving plants and will put an additional 1,000 in the ground this fall.

Tuesday's portion of the meeting was held in Homer and open to the public. Again, roughly 40 people participated and the day began with classroom-style presentations.

Carol Adelman gave a detailed overview of Adelman Peony Gardens, discussing the many different variety and types of peonies, the benefits and disadvantages of the various types, and the most popular in root stock and cut flower sales.

President of APGA Colleen James gave an overview of the benefits of joining APGA – including the supplies that are available, the web site information, and other benefits.

Rita Jo Shoultz, the agency liaison for the group, then gave a marketing update. It seems that throughout the state, peonies being sold at the various farmers markets range in price from \$2-\$4/stem based on quality and color. Growers selling their peonies directly to retail florist shops had received \$2.50/stem. Growers selling through a brokerage or wholesaler had received a variety of prices ranging from \$1.75/stem (plus shipping) to \$2.50/stem (plus shipping).

The afternoon concluded with two farm visits, first to Aurora Blooms – Colleen James' organically grown peony field, and then to Fritz Creek Gardens – Rita Jo Shoultz's operation. Many questions were asked and answered – with guest speakers Jim and Carol Adelman being the primary source of ideas and suggestions. Overall the summer workshop and meeting was a real success. APGA members are now focused on finding new sources of funding and preparing for their fall plantings.

For more information about the Peony Project, contact Amy Pettit at 907-761-3864 or Amy.Pettit@alaska.gov. For more information on APGA, visit their web site www.alaskapeonies.org .

Alaskans pick flower power

By KAREN TREBILCOCK

NEW ZEALAND Peony Society president Rodger Whitson, of Janefield Paconies and Hydroponics, had his "brains picked" by five members of the Alaska Peony Growers Association recently.

The Americans visited the Janefield property at the height of the flowering season to find out how New Zealanders grew the export crop.

The Alaskan association is in its early days and has growers from Fairbanks and the North Pole in the interior, to the coastal areas more than 1000km away. Its crop is ready in late June and July, when the European and the rest of the American flowers have finished.

Its flowers, like New Zealand's, are known for their intense colours and large blooms, brought on by their very cold winters.

In Fairbanks at this time of year it is minus 30degC but it is just above freezing on the coast.

The Alaskan delegation was enjoying Mosgiel's summer and had already visited peony farms in Canterbury and was leaving to see more in Tasmania.

Apart from spelling the flower's name without an "a", Mr Whitson said there were a lot of similarities between the two growing groups.

"Even though they are a state of America, they still have a lot of the problems we do," Mr Whitson said.

"They have to air freight the flowers to markets, which is about four hours away for them."

Mr Whitson is coming to the end of a busy flowering season. He and his wife Cindy and their staff of four are packing the last boxes of flowers for export this week.

Even with the low New Zealand dollar, he said prices for flowers



Blooming relations: Alaska Peony Growers Association members (from left) Clay Sullivan, Sue Kent, Colleen James, Jan Hanscam and Rita Jo Shoulitz with Rodger and Cindy Whitson, of Janefield Paconies and Hydroponics, at their Guy Rd property.

were about the same as last year because of softer demand from overseas following the economic downturn.

A positive for the season was, that, for the first time, the flowers were air freighted out of Dunedin airport to Auckland instead of

being trucked to Christchurch first.

However, the plants had to undergo a MAF-approved spray programme for light-brown apple moth before the flowers could be exported to the United States.

"Then we had snow and hail in

late October, it is never easy," Mr Whitson said.

The export season starts about November 1 and for six to seven weeks Mr Whitson puts in about 17-hour days.

The Janefield shed packs for eight other growers - from

Wanaka to Palmerston to Milton. Janefield Paconies has a hectare in peonies, about 7000 plants, with 15 varieties extending the flowering season. There are plans to expand in the winter, with another half hectare to be planted.

Map of Peony farms throughout Alaska (farms with >500 peonies planted).

